



NATASHA M. PIERRE, ESQ.
State Victim Advocate

Testimony of Natasha M. Pierre, Esq., State Victim Advocate
Submitted to the Appropriations Committee
Wednesday, March 4, 2015
Re: The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) Budget

Good day Senator Bye, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. For the record, my name is Natasha Pierre and I am the Victim Advocate for the State of Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony concerning OVA's budget.

Connecticut's Constitution was amended in 1996 to include a Victim's Rights Amendment to afford crime victims the same protection and status of rights provided to those accused of committing crimes. Subsequent to incorporating victims' rights into the state constitution, state lawmakers have continued to demonstrate their strong support for and commitment toward protecting and expanding the rights of crime victims by enacting laws intended to provide genuine opportunities for crime victims to effectively participate in the criminal justice process and to require that victims' concerns are addressed by all professionals within the criminal justice system.

Connecticut's victims' rights laws serve to promote respect for crime victims, including their safety, privacy and the interest they have in seeking justice. In addition, such laws serve to foster administrative and judicial sensitivity to the difficulty experienced when crime victims are unexpectedly drawn into an often indifferent, but always confusing, criminal justice system — often at the very time they are trying to cope with injury and the trauma of personal loss.

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) was statutorily established in 1998 as an independent state agency charged with the promotion and protection of the constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims in Connecticut. OVA seeks to ensure that all crime victims have the opportunity to exercise their constitutional rights during the criminal court

process. To assist crime victims in this process, the OVA provides oversight of state and private agencies, provides advocacy to crime victims when a violation of their rights is at issue, and receives and reviews complaints of persons concerning the actions of any state agency or other entity that provides services to crime victims. When appropriate, the OVA may also initiate formal investigations into the circumstances of a complaint so as to remedy the concern in a systemic manner.

As the State Victim Advocate I direct the OVA, which consists of myself and four staff members:

- Hakima Bey-Coon, Esq., Staff Attorney 3, who independently performs a full range of legal tasks for the agency.
- Merit LaJoie, Compliant Officer, who implements and coordinates a comprehensive, statewide complaint-line operation that handles complaints filed by victims of crime and other interested parties including intake, referral and preliminary investigative matters.
- Laura J. Stefon, Durational Project Manager, who performs marketing, public education and outreach efforts for the agency.
- Vanessa DeLeon, Secretary 2, who independently performs a full range of secretarial support functions requiring an understanding of organizational policies and procedures.

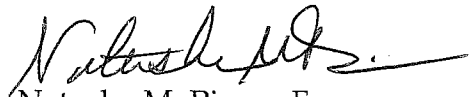
In a half a year - between July 1, 2014 and January 30, 2015 - OVA received 510 calls from the public. For 464 calls, we provided an immediate referral to another agency or service provider. For the remaining 66 calls we conducted research or verified information for the client (27) and opened a case (27). Of the 66 callers, 34 were female and 32 were male and they self-identified as African-American, Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic. The types of crimes involved were assault, burglary/theft, domestic violence, homicide/murder, sexual assault, motor vehicle, elder abuse and bullying.

OVA is getting the information to crime victims through a variety of ways, including through our partnerships with agencies that serve crime victims, e.g. the Office of Victim Services, CCADV, CONNSACS, MADD, Survivors of Homicide, and Hartford Community Cares to name a few. Additionally, OVA has sent materials to every courthouse and police station in the State, and these materials are routinely distributed to victims of crime.

As you may know, my term in office began on December 26, 2014, and the budget recommendations for the office I now hold were already submitted to you through OGA/OPM prior to my tenure. It appears that the recommended amounts submitted to you are suitable for agency function.

The work of the OVA is vital to ensuring the mandatory protection of Connecticut's crime victims. I thank you for your time and consideration, and look forward to answering any question that you may have.

Respectfully submitted,



Natasha M. Pierre, Esq.
State Victim Advocate



The Office of The Victim Advocate

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) was statutorily established in 1998 as an independent state agency charged with the promotion and protection of the constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims in Connecticut.

Connecticut's Constitution was amended in 1996 to include the Victims' Rights Amendment affords crime victims the same protection and status of rights provided to those accused of committing crimes.

Subsequent to incorporating victims' rights into the state constitution in 1996, state lawmakers have continued to demonstrate their strong support for and commitment toward protecting and expanding the rights of crime victims by enacting laws intended to provide genuine opportunities for crime victims to effectively participate in the criminal justice process and to require that victims' concerns are addressed by all professionals within the criminal justice system.

Connecticut's victims' rights laws serve to promote respect for crime victims, including their safety, privacy and the interest they have in seeking justice. In addition, such laws serve to foster administrative and judicial sensitivity to the difficulty experienced when crime victims are unexpectedly drawn into an often indifferent, but always confusing, criminal justice system—often at the very time they are trying to cope with injury and the trauma of personal loss.

These constitutional and statutory rights afforded Connecticut crime victims, represent a formal acknowledgment on the part of state lawmakers that crime victims have an important participatory role in the criminal justice system.

In order to fulfill its mandate, the OVA receives and reviews complaints of persons concerning the actions of any state agency or other entity that provides services to crime victims. When appropriate, the OVA may also initiate formal investigations into the circumstances of a complaint so as to remedy the concern in a systemic manner.

Staff roles at the Office of The Victim Advocate

State Victim Advocate (Natasha M. Pierre, JD, MSW)

Administers and directs the Office of the Victim Advocate to secure and ensure the legal, civil and special rights of victims residing in the state of Connecticut.

Staff Attorney 3 (Hakima Bey-Coon, Esq.)

Independently performs a full range of tasks in the legal tasks for the agency.

Complaint Officer (Merit LaJoie)

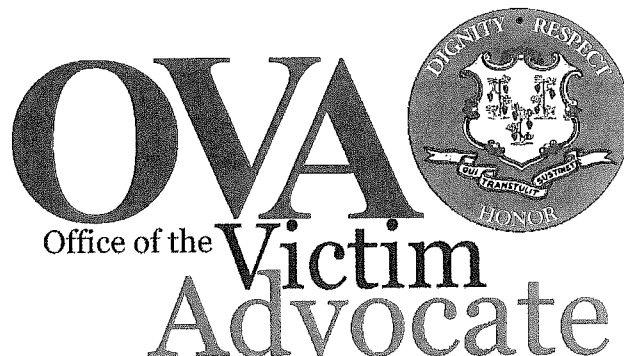
Implements and coordinates a comprehensive, statewide complaint-line operation that handles complaints filed by victims of crime and other interested parties including intake, referral and preliminary investigative matters.

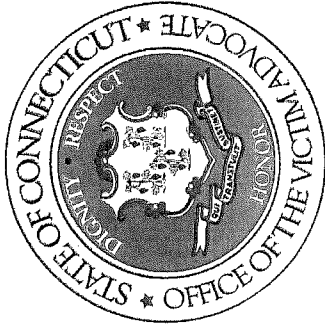
Durational Project Manager (Laura J. Stefon)

Performs marketing, public education and outreach for the agency.

Secretary 2 (Vanessa DeLeon)

Independently performs a full range of secretarial support functions requiring an understanding of organizational policies and procedures.





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Organizational Chart

